DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 760 SP 011 057

AUTHOR Harris, Mary McDonnell; McDonnell, Lois Eddy
TITLE First Steps in Open Education.
PUB DATE Feb 77
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting, Association of Teacher Educators (57th, Atlanta, Georgia, February 2-5, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *Course Objectives; Educational Change; *Inservice Teacher Education; *Institutes (Training Programs); *Open Education; Project Training Methods; Training Laboratories

ABSTRACT

Presentation is made of an inservice teacher education laboratory course designed to reduce teacher mistrust of the term "open education," to provide experiences with informal classroom approaches, and to prepare teachers to take effective steps toward opening their own classrooms. The authors discuss laboratory planning problems involving space, time, selection of study themes, curriculum development, the participation of children, and evaluation of the laboratory experience. The course plan emphasizes the use of learning centers, class meetings, and exploration of the arts in the open setting. Participation in the course provides teachers with an experience in open education on the basis of which they may develop their skills as open school educators and anticipate problems likely to occur in such a setting. At the end of the course, participants have the information to make informal decisions for or against open education, and, if for, to act with confidence in that direction. (MB)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED139760

First Steps in Open Education

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Mary McDonnell Harris
Assistant Professor of Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Kansas State University
Manhattan, KS 66506

Lois Eddy McDonnell
Associate Professor of Elementary Education
Rowland School for Young Children
Shippensburg State College
Shippensburg, Pennsylvania 17257

SP011 057

First Steps in Open Education

In 1975 we introduced a course called "Open Education" at Kansas State University. We were not sure the course would survive in a climate where "open" is a four-letter word, but it has. The course, offered for the sixth time in the summer of 1977, is thriving both in enrollment and in effect on the learners--and is completely different from the course we offered in 1975!

Mistrust of open education does not occur without reason. Reports of the chaos that can result when large groups of children are placed in spacious expanses of classroom under the supervision of teachers who have been prepared to structure time, but not space, are true! Children have suffered when teachers trained to work alone are assigned to incompatible teaching teams or when traditional textbooks are replaced by individualized learning packages that no one knows how to use.

In spite of their unfamiliarily with regional or national experiments in open education, many Kansas teachers, especially elementary teachers, find themselves at home with the philosophical base of open education. They ponder the extent of individual differences and question practices which place every child on the same page of the same textbook at the same time. They recognize responsible independence as an important goal of education and wonder how this can come about in classrooms dominated and controlled, however, benignly, by teachers. They view communication as a two-way process and are not surprised at the number of children who seem tuned out to schools in which their voices are not heard.

But philosophical affinity does not go far in helping teachers change classroom practice, and our aim, when we began, was to bring each teacher in the class to the point where that teacher could take some real, effective, and successful steps toward bringing his or her teaching performance more in line with personal beliefs about learning and the goals of education. Devising a learning experience that would provide an effective blend of theory and practice, build on the skills teachers already possessed, and lead to confidence that open education can work was the problem we faced in 1975.

A workshop format, we decided, was the answer. And so we rented a church hall, where we could control the physical environment for the duration of the three-week course, identified a study theme, and set teachers to exploring it via manipulation of materials, field trips, and the use of resource persons. This worked well, but an important ingredient was lacking. Teachers were experiencing an open environment, but they were doing so only in the role of learners.

The next summer we set up our environment in the home economics suite of a large urban high school with a facilitating custodial staff, chose a new study theme, and set teachers to exploring it with the knowledge that later in the course a group of children would be coming to study that same theme in the open environment under their leadership! This laboratory format turned out to be an intensely rewarding experience for teachers and children alike. Our purpose in the remaining paragraphs is to attempt to formulate the elements of this laboratory experience that are generalizable to other settings.

Space. The open education course was envisioned from the first as field bas. . Even when it was offered on campus, we did not find university classrooms appropriate meeting places. They are all full of chairs, totally lacking in storage space, and provided with the expectation that all evidence of any class

can be instantaneously obliterated for the convenience of the next users. Home economics suites, special education suites, and open wings of public schools are much easier to use and often have the additional bonus of cooking facilities. Because control of the physical environment is crucial to open education, and because the need for such control is sometimes very difficult to communicate to the persons who administer use of space, space must become a concern very early in the planning of an inservice experience in open education.

Time. We have offered "Open Education" in several time schedules (weekly evening meetings for a semester, four monthly two-day meetings), but the only schedule we endorse is the three-week short session in which the class meets three to four hours a day. The impact of the short course is multiplied several times over by its continuity. With shorter, scattered meetings, a major portion of each session is spent covering old ground because of doubts and frustrations aroused back in the daily teaching environment. For the duration of the short course, however, teachers can be asked to suspend judgment, to live with open education for a while. Certainly doubts and frustrations must be raised and dealt with, but the short course enables teachers to do so from a position of strength and understanding ("We have seen it work.")

Given the three-week timeframe, we suggest that at least half of that time be spent in preparation and orientation, that the children come for three or four days in the second half, and that at least two days be reserved at the end for evaluation and debriefing.

Study themes. Good open education, like good traditional education, must be rooted in sound curriculum. Coming out of a British model, we tend to think

that curriculum should be interdisciplinary, but we do not insist as strongly upon that as we do upon the explicit setting of goals. The early emphasis on curricular matters in our course is a tremendous relief to teachers because it seems familiar.

We begin the course with what the teachers initially believe is a role-play. Each teacher is assigned a role as a teacher, parent, teacher aide, or student in an open classroom where a certain theme, such as "The Earth, Our Home," is being studied. Each is asked, with others of the same role group, to devise learning activities, objectives, and resource lists that might contribute to the development of this theme. After an hour or so of discussion, the groups are brought together and their ideas pooled. As teachers become aware that this is not a role-play, that real children will soon be coming to study the curriculum they develop around this very theme, the sense of urgency and productivity grow. By the end of the second day, we hope to have come to a list of concepts or learning objectives that the teachers believe are appropriate for the theme.[2]

When content and/or objectives have been determined, teachers are ready to proceed to a consideration of teaching methods. We emphasize two methods of communicating content in the open classroom: the class meeting and the learning center. By this time we have already conducted several class meetings around such topics as, "What should be the chief goals of education?" and "Is it desirable to foster competition in the schools?" and teachers can quickly grasp the principles of the class meeting set forth by William Glasser in Schools Without Failure. The concept of the learning center as a self-directed, self-correcting sequence of activities through which the learner can achieve mastery of content independently is harder to grasp.[3] We require that each student plan and construct a learning center that teaches some part of the

definition of the study theme agreed upon by the class. Providing numerous examples on other themes, we work with each teacher to come up with a workable center plan.

The selection of the study theme is pivotal in our approach to teaching about open education. We attempt to choose a theme that has potential for interdisciplinary development. By insisting that all learning centers teach an element of the theme, we prevent the manufacture of addition fact drills, consonant blend races, and many other activities that can be produced with little thought. The problem of developing a learning center to teach a given concept to children of given ages usually challenges teachers to come up with totally original learning centers as good as those in resource books, which have the additional property, usually, of being readily adaptable to their own home teaching situations.

Although we recognize the value of having learners choose their own study themes, we have seen no way to build this into a three-week laboratory. Our field-based orientation often requires us to go to the site of the class armed with resources to get us through the entire first week, and even if that were not so, it is hard to imagine a diverse group's coming to agree on a satisfactory study theme the first day of class. Themes which lend themselves to interdisciplinary development and which are broad enough to accomodate numerous subtopics include: The Earth, Our Home

Survival

Food

Shelter

People and the Things They Do

Your Body and You

Communication

Transportation

Long Ago and Today

The arts. The relationship of the arts to the cognitive curriculum is a matter to which teachers have given little or no consideration. In the next phase of the open education course, we attempt to provide teachers with numerous experiences in which movement, dramatics, creative writing, music, the visual arts, and cooking contribute to the development of the study theme. Our methodology in this part of the course is direct modeling: one of us assumes the role of teacher, and the teachers become learners. After participating in a group of experiences with self-expression through the arts, teachers are able to divide into groups and design similar experiences for children.

Our outlook on the arts has become more and more integrated as we've worked with the open education format. At first we provided a separate experience with each of the arts we chose to develop. Now we find that music flows into movement, which flows into art or dramatics, which flow into writing; that cooking leads to tasting, which can serve as the stimulus for expression in any medium; that the arts have a way of intertwining and coming together to provide exciting multi-media experiences if one is open to the possibility.

The children. Finding children for the laboratory experience has not been difficult. By sending home letters with children who attend the elementary school nearest the course site, we have been able to find enough of predesignated age groups available on the necessary days and able to come to the course site. So far we have tried to include children of two grades:

third and fourth or fourth and fifth. Although multiage grouping does not have to be part of open education, preparing for a multiage group helps teachers see that age may not be the most relevant criteria for pupil assignment.

When the children come, each has been previously contacted by one of the class members. Children get together with their teacher contacts to participate in an activity designed to introduce the study theme. Then there is a period for work at the learning centers and time for small group experiences in the arts. The children come for about two hours a day for three or four days, each session including use of learning centers, exploration of the arts, and a class meeting.

After the children leave each day, there is time for evaluation and planning. Following the first day of child involvement, some learning centers are improved in clarity and simplicity, and the teachers begin to consider the way one relates to children in an open environment. They look to the instructors and to each other for role models to fit their emerging concept of the open teacher, the teacher as guide and resource person and learner.

Debriefing. What a letdown when the last child has left! At this stage of the course, most teachers are eager to sign a contract to teach in an open school, but, unfortunately, no one is holding such a contract out to them. We allow two days for reality to set in and to try to develop a perspective on open schools and on what concerned teachers can do to effect change in their home situations.

In preparation for this, we require each student to read at least one book from a list of introductions to open education.[4] We find that the required reading helps our credibility. Teachers come to see that open

education is not a disease unique to us and that the way we do it is not necessarily the only way that works. We include on our recommended list only books that attempt to deal with the problems of open education as well as its triumphs.

Among the mental images created in the minds of teachers through their reading and their experiences in the course, we project slides taken in open schools we have visited and present case studies of how they got to be the way they are. We hold class meetings to discuss such questions as, "Is the British model suitable for American schools?" and "Can an open classroom exist outside of an open school?" We role-play confrontations with parents, principals, and custodians that could occur in an opening school and explore how such confrontations could have been avoided. Then teachers are left to make their own decisions as to what, if anything, they will do about open education.

We endorse the laboratory model for introducing teachers to open education. It provides them with a basis for evaluating their own efforts and for anticipating the problems that may arise as they attempt to implement new techniques in their home classrooms. The course appears to us to be neither an ivory tower consideration of open education nor a hard sell. It provides the background out of which teachers can make informed decisions about open education and act on those decisions with confidence in the direction of their first steps.

Footnotes

[1]We view "open education" as an umbrella for school practices whose purpose is to individualize instruction in ways that place primary responsibility for learning on the learner, to provide learners with alternatives from which they may choose according to their own goals, and to enable persons to discover and express themselves freely through the arts. We recognize that some programs labeled "open" do not meet this definition and that some not called "open," do. In general, however, we regard "open education" as an ideal and the schools that are working toward it as "opening."

[2]Some teachers and/or their school districts have strong feelings or policies about the format of curricular statements. We believe that performance objectives can easily be derived from lists of concepts, attitudes, and skills to be developed in the child, and vice versa. Thus, we accept from our group focused statements of purpose in any form.

[3]Although there are some looser definitions of learning center in use, we select a rigorous definition because it exposes teachers to the most powerful uses of this methodology.

[4]Blitz, Barbara. The Open Classroom: Making It Work. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1973.

Devaney, Kathleen. Developing Open Education in America. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1974.

Hertzberg, Alvin, and Edward F. Stone. Schools Are for Children: An American Approach to the Open Classroom. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

Howes, Virgil M. Informal Teaching in the Open Classroom. New York: Macmillan, 1974.

Rathbone, Charles H. Open Education: The Informal Classroom. New York: Citation, 1971.

Weber, Lillian. The English Infant School and Informal Education. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971.